

CTCS 500: Seminar in Film Theory

Fall 2023
Fridays
10am–1:50pm
SCB 104

J.D. Connor
SCA 323
M 10–12 & by appointment
Reserve Monday slots at
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Course Description

Catalog description: Introduction to classical and contemporary film theory; exploration of their relationship to filmic experimentation.

This course emphasizes the ongoing vitality of film theory as an intellectual endeavor by pairing classic essays in the field with current work. It also seeks to cultivate a “theoretical mindset” by pairing work in film theory with notable theoretical work in other fields. In-class screenings will emphasize extensions and applications and tests of the concepts derived from the theoretical texts.

Learning Objectives

[The Center for Excellence in Teaching notes that “Learning Objectives identify the specific, measurable skills a student will demonstrate by the end of the course. Learning objectives should be both taught and assessed by the instructor. They are aligned with the assignments, assessments, and learning materials. They complete the sentence “By the end of this course, students will be able to” and avoid verbs such as understand, learn, and know. Refer to CET resources, [Bloom’s Taxonomy](#), [Learning objectives FAQ](#), [Writing learning objectives.](#)”]

If I asked my faculty colleagues in the division what these should be, and we followed Bloom’s taxonomy, we would end up with something like this. By the end of this course students will be able to:

- Recount at least six debates in the history of film theory
- Test concepts from film theory against individual films
- Develop testable theoretical concepts from films
- Write an essay that clarifies the relationships between the explicit arguments and implicit presumptions of film-theoretical texts
- Write compelling essays that integrate novel understandings of films or film-theoretical concepts or both

And if I were to base the objectives on what you have expressed as your desires and worries they would be:

- Write better

- Have an easier time reading difficult prose
- Find ways of making film theory useful in your own academic work
- Find ways of avoiding that feeling in seminar that things are moving too fast or that your interests aren't being addressed

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Readings will be posted on the course Blackboard site and organized by week. Reference copies of motion pictures we screen in class will be linked to through Blackboard.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Reading Questions 10%

Each week, ideally by the start of business Thursday, students will submit questions about the readings that they would like answered. Not “responses,” not “extended provocations,” but things that you think we could either *actually* answer because they are the sorts of questions that have answers or things we could discuss because they are the sorts of questions that don't really have answers. You need to do 10 of these over the term (so, not every week but nearly): 3 about classic essays, 3 about current essays, 3 about adjacent theoretical texts, 1 for Kyle Stevens's visit (see Schedule of Classes for details). You should expect to be asked to discuss your question. Email your question to me using the following subject line: Date (in day-month form as on the schedule below), Classic/Current/Adjacent, author last name. So if you were sending me a question about Turvey in week two it would be 1 Sept Current Turvey. Please cc Jiwon.

Reading Questions Questions & Participation 10%

Periodically I will pause the discussion to ask if folks have questions about the questions we've been discussing or ways of expanding on those questions in light of what we have read and viewed. You should, I imagine, have things to contribute to that discussion most weeks.

Explication 20%

A 1250-word explication of a particularly tricky passage (usually a paragraph) from one of our texts. That explication lays out the presumptions and the internal logic of the argument in a step-wise fashion. It concludes with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of that argument. As formulaic as this assignment is, there is still a priority on argumentative clarity, incisive analysis, and fluid prose.

Debate 25%

A 1750-word recounting of a significant point of debate between two of our theorists. After laying out the significance of the issue and the competing claims, the essay will work

through each author's critique of the other (imagined or explicit) *and their imagined responses*. You can imagine that hiding inside the first few pages of this essay are two versions of the explication assignment, each condensed and sharpened. In addition to the clarity, incisiveness, and fluidity, this essay demands fair, even generous, treatment of the competing arguments.

Debate and Application 35%

2750 wds. This essay either works from a confounding motion picture toward a film-theoretical question or from a confounding film-theoretical question (debate) toward a useful or pointed motion picture example. Yes, there is a version of the second essay hiding inside this one. The results of this essay should be a novel interpretation of the movie in question and a (relatively) novel or at least significantly nuanced concept that might have future use in the analysis of film.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
Reading Questions	10
Reading Questions Questions & Participation	10
Explication essay (1250 wds. ± 10%)	20
Debate essay (1750 wds. ± 10%)	25
Debate and application (2750 wds. ± 10%)	35
TOTAL	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

Letter grade	Point value
A	95-100
A/-	93.33
A-	91.67
A-/B+	90
B+	88.33
B/+	86.67
B	85
B/-	83.33
B-	81.67
B-/C+	80
Etc.	
F	59 and below

Submissions

Written work should be submitted through Turnitin on Blackboard. Writing should be double-spaced, left-justified, and in Courier New—you should *do* the writing that way, not simply submit the writing that way. (Why? Because Courier [New] appears hideous and provisional and it will be easier for you to revise your work when it is hideous and

provisional. In addition, as a fixed-width font, it results in consistent 250-word pages. Essays should have page numbers and separate title pages. There should be a word count at the end. Citations should be done as footnotes, Chicago style.

Late assignments are marked down 1/6 of a letter grade per half business day, e.g., A- to A-/B+. An assignment due at 5pm and submitted at midnight or at 6am is marked down 1/6. An assignment due at 5pm and submitted the next day at 10am or 4pm is marked down 1/3. Weekends count as one business day. Please allow yourself to sleep.

Grading Timeline

I will make every effort to return assignments within a week.

Attendance

In-person attendance is mandatory. Missed classes will result in 5% grade penalties.

Discussion norms

Surprisingly, discussions in CTCS 500 have, in the past, become quite heated. Since this is my first time teaching this class at USC, I don't know where those moments have arisen. I expect discussion to be respectful, constructive, and inclusive. *At the same time*, I also expect folks to say things they don't quite mean, to mis-formulate statements, to misjudge the connotations of their contributions, and generally to make mistakes. It will be easier to row-back those mistakes if we all commit to the sorts of norms listed [here](#). (The procedures described there are not generally applicable, but I will ask that folks state their names at the beginnings of contributions for the first several weeks.)

Course Evaluations

In addition to the standard end-of-semester evaluation, there will be a midterm evaluation. That interim assessment will help us settle on the materials we discuss in the final sessions. These formal moments of evaluation should not dissuade you from raising any concerns or making suggestions for the conduct of the course at other times.

Schedule of Classes

Date	Session	Topics	Readings	Screening	Due
25 Aug	1	Currents	<i>In Media Res</i> film theory roundups Kyle Stevens, "Introduction," <i>Oxford Handbook of Film Theory</i>	Joanna Hogg, <i>The Souvenir</i>	
1 Sept	2	Medium Specificity Or Affordance?	Classic: Arnheim; Tutor Code Current: Turvey Adjacent: Affordance Theory	Ernie Gehr, <i>Side Walk Shuffle</i> Ozu, <i>Floating Weeds</i>	
8 Sept	3	789	Classic: Balazs, Bazin Current: Morgan, Hanich Adjacent:	Xie, <i>Two Stage Sisters</i>	
15 Sept	4	The Male Gaze And After	Classic: Mulvey, hooks Current: Keeling, Young Adjacent:	Julie Dash, <i>Daughters of the Dust</i>	
22 Sept	5	Cinema and Its Double	Classic: Statement on Sound, Chion Current: Brinkema Adjacent: Artaud	Von Sternberg, <i>Blonde Venus</i>	Explication Essay
29 Sept	6	Apparatus and Phenomenon	Classic: Comolli, Sobchack Current: Stevens Section VI selection Adjacent: Merleau-Ponty		
6 Oct	7	Automaticity and Artificiality	Classic: Benjamin, Cavell Current: Somaini Adjacent:	Jean Renoir, <i>Rules of the Game</i>	
13 Oct	No Session USC Minibreak/Post45 (USC)				
20 Oct	8	Critique and Criticality	Classic: Benjamin Current: Baumbach Adjacent: Latour		
27 Oct	9		Classic: Deren Current: Iyer, Rhodes Adjacent:	Deren, <i>On Violence</i>	Debate Essay
3 Nov	10	Cinema and Its Doppler Kyle Stevens Visit	Classic Current: Stevens, Rangan? Adjacent		Stevens Question
10 Nov	No Session Veterans Day				
17 Nov	11	TBD			
24 Nov	No Session Thanksgiving				
1 Dec	No Session Transforming Hollywood (UCLA)				
TBD	12	TBD		Joanna Hogg, <i>The Souvenir, Part II</i>	
5 Dec					Debate & Application Essay

Academic Integrity

[These 5 paragraphs are required to be included on our syllabuses.]

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Use of Generative AI in This Course

The upshot is: don't.

The Center for Excellence in Teaching suggests the following:

Since creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

If found responsible for an academic violation, students may be assigned university outcomes, such as suspension or expulsion from the university, and grade penalties, such as an “F” grade on the assignment, exam, and/or in the course.

I hate this! I don’t care whether the workplace is competitive or not! I don’t think creating thinking skills can be a learning outcome! I don’t even know what that means! Nouns and verbs, “person or entity,” passive voice all over the place, what is even going on?

Here is my current version, which I will be refining over time, as generative A.I. tools shift, as the likely student body in each course changes, etc.

The work you submit for evaluation in this course is expected to be your work. Currently, text and images generated by artificial intelligence are not copyrightable in the U.S. In this narrow sense, then, such results cannot be *your* work because they cannot belong to you *or anyone*. Whether adding tweaks to the results of a generative A.I. prompt amounts to sufficient intervention to make *that* text and *those* images copyrightable is currently under litigation. Since the aim of the course is not to explore the edges of copyrightability or authorship, engaging in baroque workarounds to make A.I. results theoretically submissible amounts to academic fraud and will be treated as such.

This extends to even boring use cases like GrammarlyGo or other writing-assistants and to A.I. summaries generated by search engines. While the capabilities of generative transformers are increasing rapidly, they are still prone to the outright fabrication of facts, links, and sources (ask me about some depressing plagiarism cases!). In their current versions, such programs offer no traceable trail from their results to the sources. In humanistic scholarship, being able to trace the path of idea and its supporting evidence from conception through formulation to critique is *the whole deal*. But transforms cannot, and in their current legal shadowlands *will not* be able to do that because if they *did* do that they would make clear to everyone that they sit upon a pile of copyright violations the size of the Great Pyramids.

You are a grand, unique, twisted mess of influences, and your thinking and prose style should reflect that. Generative A.I. tools as they currently exist will impede your efforts to realize the fullest, best version of yourself and thwart your ability to become someone even better. They will make you boring, and that will deprive me and your teaching assistants the possibility of getting to know and advise the real you.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment. Those are:

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation is prohibited. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is also prohibited. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other medium. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Students and Disability Accommodations

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

The accommodations that the university makes available in order to meet its legal burdens do not exhaust. If there are things affecting your learning that do not rise to the level of an OSAS accommodation, please feel free to raise them with me and we will make every effort to meet your needs.

Support Systems

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.